IMPOSSIBLE!
Luke 23:50-24:10
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"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
to the last syllable of recorded time;
and all our yesterdays have lighted fools
the way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
that struts and frets his hour upon the stage
and then is heard no more; it is a tale
told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."
(Macbeth, William Shakespeare, Act 5, Scene 5, Line 19).

That's Macbeth, hearing that the Queen is dead. The power of those remarkable lines is not simply the perfect cadence of Shakespearean prose. The power of those lines is that you and I know exactly what they are about. They catch and hold up for painful illumination an experience everyone of us has had. We skip merrily through the days of our lives mostly and then, out of the blue, without warning, we have a head-on collision with mortality: in the form of death of someone dear to us, or the whispered announcement that an acquaintance is gravely ill, or more subtly, in the occasional awareness that deterioration and decay, eternal metaphors for death, are real and doing their work in the world and in the things we love about the world. It is always, this confrontation with the reality of death, a confrontation with our own mortality. Our idiom is not Shakespearean, but it always precipitates the same deep asking, yearning which - if left unanswered, becomes grim, dark depression. They go hand in hand, you know - death and that deep pessimism the philosophers call meaninglessness..."Out, out brief candle - Life's a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

And so it was for a pathetic handful of people, huddling behind a locked door somewhere in Jerusalem nineteen hundred and forty or so years ago. Just one week before, everything had been perfect. Jesus, their Rabbi and friend and leader, made a dramatic entry to the city. The Passover crowds had cheered Him wildly, spread branches and the clothes from their backs in His path. But as suddenly as it had erupted it began to fade. By Thursday, the nervous politicians and religious officials had gotten together, conceived a plan to get rid of Him, arranged a trap which was now closing. When they sat down to eat that night they knew it was all over. They were right. The arrest happened after dinner. A hurried religious trial was held in the middle of the night. By daybreak on Friday, they had Him in front of the governor and by noon of that same day, He was hanging on a cross between two thieves. They hadn't even time to discuss how they should respond or behave. And so, one by one, they had simply faded into the background.

Late Friday afternoon, as the Sabbath was beginning, one of the members of the court that had condemned Him asked for and received permission to remove the body and bury it. Several women in the entourage of disciples had watched as the body was taken down and carried away. From a distance they followed to the tomb, and observing the burial preparations they hurried back to the room where all were staying to prepare spices and ointments for the now quite dead body. But, by that time, Sabbath had begun and the appropriate burial rites would have to be delayed until it was over - early on the first day of the week.

That in-between time has always intrigued me, that devastating experience after a head-on collision with death. They had time Saturday to reflect. It wasn't just the loss of their teacher and friend. That was most immediate, obviously. More powerful, however, was the sense that they had been wrong: that the ideas, the dreams of what human life could be, were now dead. The compelling vision of God's Kingdom coming into the life of

their world had been trampled into the dry Judean dust as thoroughly as Rome had eliminated the fragile life of one of its more modest subjects. "Out, out brief candle - life's a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Before dawn, after Sabbath, the women who knew where the tomb was located, bundled up their packages of spices and jars of ointment, and quietly let themselves out into the dark city streets. When they arrived at the Garden tomb they found it open and the body gone. When they returned to the hiding place and tried to tell what they had seen the disciples didn't believe them. "An idle tale," Luke reports - "nonsense" the New English Bible translates: the predictable result of stress, grief, psychological trauma, exhaustion, the dim light of dawn and overactive imagination. Impossible!

Precisely. There is nothing to the stereotype of the disciples as ignorant, gullible men. Instead, the record reports that they reacted in the very way we would want them to react, which is to say with thorough skepticism. Impossible! Precisely. William Stringfellow, in a recent essay points to "the fact that none of the disciples can be said to have understood Jesus...have recognized his works or to have acknowledged his authority..." (Sojourners, March 1980, p.13). Stringfellow suggests that if the disciples exemplify anything for us it is not faith but incredulity; not naiveté, but skepticism.

When the women told them what they saw - they didn't believe it. They didn't believe it easily or willingly later on. They resisted it as long as they could. They didn't believe and couldn't believe because it didn't make sense.

We can understand that. It does not make sense. Pessimism, morbidity, nihilism, meaninglessness are more rational than a resurrection. Smart money is on Macbeth, not St. Luke. They were skeptical because they were essentially rational people. So are we. In fact, we have been busy, in these past few centuries, making a religion out of human reason.

A major feature article in last week's Time Magazine on the subject of God's comeback in the academic community documented the process by which modern culture fell hopelessly in love with human reason and made of it the sole arbiter of truth. It began in the enlightenment but no one expressed it as clearly in our time as Lord Bertrand Russell. He wrote: "What science cannot tell us, mankind cannot know." The foundations of that thoroughly rational structure are shaking, however. University philosophers are talking about God again and the reason is, very simply, that we now know that there is a lot out there that science and human reason does not find accessible. The scientists are telling us that, not some woolly brained theologian. The astro-physicists like David Wilkinson, Chairman of the Physics Department at Princeton, who stood in this Sanctuary several weeks ago and warned us, gently, against the arrogance of assuming that our minds determine the perimeters of reality. According to Time nobody is talking like that anymore: "Science has become much less presumptuous and ambitious, its theorizing about cosmic astronomy closer to theology."

The disciples were not convinced by the emptiness of the tomb. Empirical evidence simply doesn't get the job done although we do keep trying. Church historian Martin Marty, only partially with tongue in cheek addresses the non-believers in our midst: "Yawn, please, whenever a preacher tries to 'prove' the resurrection. Your boredom will help us face the issue of faith. Silly putty proofs and reasonings insult you and thoughtful Christians. They convince only the convinced. Easter rises from the experience of faith - then and now." (New York Times Magazine, 3/30/75).

An idle tale...nonsense...impossible...so long as your powers of reason are the only arbiter of truth. But if there is more - if the system is not closed and therefore ultimately available to human reason but, in fact exploding...if - as Professor Wilkinson suggested, there are an infinite number of universes - which I interpret as the scientific code for "God" - if, in fact, love is more powerful than death...The unpardonable offense this day is not unbelief, but an attempt to whittle the truth down to size - our size. John Updike, whose poetry and novels are strongly theological said that beautifully in a poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter"...

"Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign
painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door...
Let us not seek to make it less monstrous
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarassed by the miracle..."

(In The Christian Century, 4/2/80, p.371-2, Telephone Poles and Other Poems, John Updike, 1963).

From the beginning of the Christian era, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has never been argued effectively. The mode was and is not argument but proclamation. The motif is not a reasoned thesis but a joyful angelic anthem. The mood is not seriously academic, but light, lively, with lots of laughing.

Nobody ever believed it because someone else convinced him/her that it made sense. About the best the preacher can do, I have resolved, is repeat the proclamation as reasonably as possible and then sit down and let the choir take over.

People in the past believed in the resurrection because they had to: because, that is to say, they experienced something which could be described in no other way. Once again, historian Marty, only partially in jest, addresses our Jewish brothers and sisters: "do us, and others a favor - press this nation's vast Christian majority to begin to 'walk in newness of life'. This old world of decay and death could use such a surprise. Meanwhile, in the spirit of Nietzsche, you have the right to say, 'Funny, you don't look redeemed or resurrected'." (Op. cit.)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is asserted, documented and proved not in eloquent sermons on this day, but in life...where death is shouted down, and decay is reversed and sin is mocked. The resurrection is experienced whenever the strength of love is affirmed in a life long marriage, for instance: or whenever the processes of death and decay in the city, for instance, are quite simply ignored by a church that refuses to move out, but instead remains; or whenever someone, against long odds, in fact, against the inertia of the status quo, decides that the system really can work justly, fairly. The resurrection is affirmed whenever hope shows its surprising and always lovely face - in concentration camps, in intensive care units, in the lives of idealistic young college students, in the sacrifice of research scientists or politicians running in a primary; anywhere in fact where people make the decision that human life - in the future - is worth the effort.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is affirmed when meaninglessness is pushed back and pessimism countered by simple, human hard work: when people say with their lives that human life is not a "tale told by an idiot" but an infinitely and eternally precious gift of God: when, for instance, individuals decide that it is worth it to live decently and generously and peacefully and honestly.

Macbeth articulated what I have called the rational response to death. Reason dictates depression, sadness, nihilism. That is the bottom line. Life is a "tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing" if death is the resolution. Everyone has known that, even if we don't say it out loud in polite company. The French existentialists were right. Without a resurrection, without a sovereign God, human life is essentially absurd. Without some sense that God's will is sovereign and His concerns for peace and kindness and justice ultimately victorious...apart from some sense of God human life does become absurd quickly - dealing in banalities like "ring around the collar" and "how many calories in diet Pepsi". But if a resurrection happened: if Jesus Christ is alive: if death did not resolve it: if ahead of us is not nothingness, but the same love that created us, then - may I suggest - there is reason to sing a hymn and shed a tear of joy and embrace your dear ones and look forward, not backward, but forward to tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow with confidence and hope and resolve.

Thus, Hans Kung in the middle of his monumental theology, with measured words, rests the case...for me at least...

> "...the living God is the unshakeably faithful God...
> He is the creator who keeps faith with his creation and partner, come what may. He does not withdraw his yes to life, but at the decisive frontier itself adds another yes to his first yes. He is faithful in death and beyond death." (On Being a Christian, p.357).

"Impossible," the first people who heard about it concluded. And then they began to experience it in life, and in themselves, and without the ability to explain it they found that they were believing it and that it had begun to infuse their lives with joy and meaning and love and hope. And it wasn't impossible any more. In fact, it became and becomes the towering reality in life.

Jesus Christ is Risen.

Amen.

Eternal God, we believe. Help our unbelief. We are grateful for this day, for its joy and laughter: for one another: for our church and for the privilege of living a life in which resurrection is a reality: through Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

Amen.